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ABSTRACT

Researcher Patricia Seed has noted the difficulty undergraduates have in understanding concepts of other cultures. Differences in vocabulary sometimes underscore differences in culture. Seed has suggested that cross- or multi-cultural education cannot proceed from a position of ignorance or arrogance. It is possible to move from cultural misunderstanding by brainstorming solutions from the patterns of those misunderstandings. Researchers have observed that culture shock can be a learning experience. As students experience a strange culture for the first time vicariously in the classroom, their values are challenged and they may experience culture shock. The students may require support for their own positions and the opportunity to adjust to new ideas and customs. Simulations, in which students assume characteristics and behaviors of the people they are studying, often provide a useful way to teach about other cultures. As Seed suggests, teachers need to find ways to make the familiar unfamiliar and the unfamiliar familiar. The effort to make teaching more effective has to be a long term, collaborative effort. (SG)

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NEW TOOLS FOR MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

A response to Patricia Seed's "Multiculturalism and the Predicament of the Comparative Method in Historical and Social Science Research and Teaching," presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Atlanta, GA, April 1993.

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In her paper, "Multiculturalism and the Predicament of the Comparative Method in Historical and Social Science Research and Teaching," Patricia Seed has described the difficulty undergraduates have in understanding cultural concepts that differ from those held by their own culture.[1] As an example, she cites the problem of having students comprehend that the basic institution of Spanish colonial rule was the *encomienda*, which was a grant of labor not a grant of land. The distinction among colonies belonging to different countries has lond been acknowledged by historians who have traditionally spoken of colonies of exploitation versus colonies of settlement (Spanish and Portuguese versus English and French, with Dutch in between the two types). Dr. Seed's contribution to this issue has been, first, to examine the cultural implications of the differences embedded in language, which she has done in an elegant paper published last year in the *William and Mary Quarterly*.[2] Secondly, in this paper she has considered how the linguistic and cultural factors she has previously identified impact upn her students' ability to learn about colonial variations.

Understanding that the issues she is dealing with refer to cultural variations unfamiliar to many of her students, and in order to prepare them for understanding what is strange to them, Dr. Seed found strategies to break down their resistance to concepts that were culturally unlike their own. She found her handle for this in George Marcus's *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*. In that book, Marcus speaks of "defamiliarization" and "refamiliarization." Dr. Seed explains that "defamiliarization" is needed because otherwise culturally different information is either NOT BELIEVED or it is accepted with an attitude of SMUG SUPERIORITY. "It is the response of wink-wink nudge-nudge to the

antics of another individual or group whose cultural codes are different or unfamiliar," she writes. (I am reminded of Linda Steet's as-yet-unpublished study of one hundred years of the portrayal of Arabs in the *National Geographic Magazine*, where the very same wink-wink nudge-nudge responses seems often to be found.) Dr. Seed does not condemn these responses. Her intention, she claims, is "simply to suggest that such strategies are inappropriate for creating cross-cultural understanding, ill-suited to an educational setting, and unless they are anticipated, they may be the unanticipated consequence of well-meaning efforts at cross-cultural education."

I'd like to digress for a moment in considering Dr. Seed's illustration of her own exploration of the way **language** impacts upon English and American ways of talking about people and land. She mentions that in Spanish the words "heathen" and "barbarous" refer to **people**, they cannot be used to describe **land**. She goes on to indicate that "we could, using the English language, the Queen's English in this case, simply avoid any mention of the people in the New World." I was immediately drawn back in memory to a presentation of writing from diaries and letters by men about the Vietnam War given in March 1993 in Syracuse by three women storytellers. One speaker was an American pilot in a letter describing dropping bombs on waterlogged land. No people were mentioned, though he described the terrain in some detail. After him, a Vietnamese boy told how he was watching his father walking behind his waterbuffalo, ploughing his waterlogged land, when two planes, swooping from the clouds, blew his father and the buffalo to pieces. There is a symbiosis, I think, between our vocabulary that allows us to conceal the people who dwell in a land, and our

technology that enables us to conceal its lethal qualities by distancing ourselves from the point of contact with the enemy, who are always people like ourselves.

Dr. Seed tried to make the unfamiliar familiar in the case she describes (of Spaniards reading aloud to uncomprehending people the documents entitling them to claim authority over them for the king and queen) by showing her students that even today in the United States we assume that merely "reading aloud" a person's rights is sufficient for them to understand what their rights are under the Miranda v. Arizona decision. Again, let me digress a moment on ways to make the unfamiliar familiar. It has been suggested that one may learn new ideas in two ways: through information and through storytelling. Most people learn more easily through stories than through receiving information directly. But, there is a crucial point to remember about stories: they are effective as a means of learning only when some part of them links to the listeners' own experience (making the unfamiliar familiar) and only when the listener then goes on **to elaborate his or her own story with part of that material**. Hence, the first way a person uses the new material from a story is **not** to take it as whole cloth and then use it, but to take part of it -- perhaps, only a small part -- and add it to one's own possessions. If I may apply that idea for a moment to the teaching problem Dr. Seed has described, I would suggest that American students might be able to expand their understanding by learning that a grant of **land** by the British monarch meant that if the land were already populated, one had the right **either** to drive the people out, **or** to strike a deal with them so that, in return for their labor, they could remain on the land. Otherwise, in order to repopulate the land to make it productive, one would either have

to import hired labor or be prepared to sell off parts of one's land, or, as was the case in some areas, one imported and/or raised slave laborers. In all these cases, one can reach out from the notion of the transfer of land, to the notion of the need **for labor -- for services** -- while still building on the British emphasis on **land.** From there, once **our own story has been elaborated**, we can become familiar enough with the unfamiliar to see why Spaniards might consider the basic foundation of colonialism as being **the acquisition of the rights to people's labor.**

However, I think there has to be reciprocity in this understanding, because while the British may appear obsessed with **land** as the basis of colonial power, the Spanish could hardly deny any interest in land at all. Only because they had the naval and military power to conquer the land, could they gain access to the labor they needed for trade. British obsession with land, on the other hand, went hand-in-hand with the desire among some British citizens to **settle in new lands**, and it is the definition of colonialism as settlement rather than as exploitation of resources, especially labor, that many Americans today consider to be the only form of colonialism. (I use exploitation here to mean "the use of something to its fullest extent" and not "the abuse of something or someone else for one's own good," although historians may consider both meanings appropriate, in the end, to describe sixteenth century colonialism.) I believe that the unwillingness of Americans to perceive the variations of the basic institutions of colonialism helps blind us to the possible validity of current claims that the United States is a colonial power today, par excellence, through its **appropriation of the labor of citizens of other countries**, and its cultural imperialism manifested by its command of the

media in other cultures, especially TV and film.

In her paper, Dr Seed claims that cross-cultural or multi-cultural education cannot proceed effectively either from positions of arrogance or ignorance. And, further, that among students "the existence of patterns of mistakes, patterns of misunderstandings should provide the research agendas for trying to understand what the underlying cultural resistances are to understanding a certain kind of knowledge." The hardest resistances to deal with, she suggests, are areas that "impinge upon students' political beliefs." Challenges to these may be met with denial. American students will not "identify with themselves as an imperial nation." For instance, in relation to invasions of central and south America. Dr. Seed says that in a strange way she respects the various strategies of denial people use. "What any group of students is able to assimilate depends very much on their own experiences." I agree with Dr. Seed, and yet, as she hints, there are ways to help students move beyond the limits of their experience.

Dr. Seed suggests that we should begin to study patterns of misunderstandings, look at the linguistic and cultural foundations for those misunderstandings, and brainstorm ways to deal with them. From my own work on conflict resolution, I would add that work undertaken by the Harvard negotiation project on ways to identify a person's **interests** and to differentiate those from his or her **positions**, provides another way to grapple with the underlying barriers to communication and understanding.[3] Because, when we look at the substance of misunderstanding between the Spaniards on one side, and the British on the other during the sixteenth century we have to acknowledge that even when one has made allowances for the linguistic and cultural

problems of translation in the sixteenth century, another source of tension remains because each had, as well as the desire to Christianize native populations, a specific interest -- the desire to expand the markets for their own goods. How to divide the economic spoils of the world without resorting to force is a problem that faces us still today.

Lastly, the work of my colleague Paul Pedersen and others one **culture shock as a learning experience** provides new potential for cross-cultural studies.[4] We should, I believe, place more attention than we do on using comparative studies in history and the social sciences to encourage culture shock vicariously, and thus to enhance multicultural understanding among our students. Those who encounter a strange culture for the first time vicariously, through learning about it in a course, may experience less traumatic dislocation than those physically in a strange environment, but nevertheless, as their values are challenged, they may go through the same steps of shock, need the same support for their own integrity and self-esteem, and adjust to new ideas and customs at differing rates. According to Brislin and Pedersen, "When the same stimulus requires a very different response the adjustment is most difficult. Therefore when you are prompted to behave in the new setting by back-home cues you are likely to encounter trouble."[5] This suggests why simulations often provide a useful way to teach students about other cultures, be they contemporary or historical. In a simulation, the students have to assume the characteristics and behaviors of the people involved. In doing so, they have to experiment with behaviors that have different meanings from the ones they ascribe to them.

Like Dr. Seed, whom I thank for her provocative paper, I think hand-wringing about our students' inability to discern the significance of cultural differences is fruitless. As Dr. Seed has suggested, as teachers we have to find ways to make the familiar unfamiliar, and the unfamiliar familiar. That is no small task. The results of our work may not be measurable on tests given at the end of a course. The essence of culture shock is that it takes place in stages. We, as teachers, need to take account of those stages in order to make our own teaching more effective. Ours has to be a long-term, collaborative effort.

NOTES

1. Patricia Seed, "Multiculturalism and the Predicament of the Comparative Method in Historical and Social Science Research and Teaching," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Atlanta, GA, April 1993.

2. Patricia Seed, "Taking Possession and Reading Texts: Establishing the Authority of Overseas Empires," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d series, vol. 49 (April 1992): 183-209.

3. See, Roger Fisher and William Ury, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), part 2, chapter 3.

4. See, P. Pedersen, *The Five Stages of Culture Shock: Critical Incidents Around the World* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1993): in press.

5. R. W. Brislin and P. B. Pedersen, *Cross Cultural Orientation Programs* (New York: Gardner Press, 1976) as quoted by P. Pedersen in *Pre-Departure Orientation Program for DIPA Students,* booklet prepared by the Office of International Services, Syracuse University, 1993.